

Reports and Commentaries

The Fritz Felbermayer legacy

Betty Haoa Rapahango and Tania Basterrica Brockman

Fritz Felbermayer Blecha, an Austrian man who lived in Chile, was a great philanthropist and benefactor of the Rapanui people. In his travels to Easter Island, he collected more than two thousand objects of the Rapanui culture, which are currently in the collection of the Fonck Museum in Viña del Mar, Chile. His memory and his work are preserved through the exhibition of these objects in the museum and through the support he provided for young people from the island who came to the continent to study, becoming professionals.

Fritz Felbermayer Blecha, austriaco avecindado en Chile, fue un gran filántropo y benefactor del pueblo rapanui. En sus viajes a Isla de Pascua logró reunir más de dos mil objetos de la cultura rapanui, los cuales se encuentran actualmente en el Museo Fonck de Viña del Mar, Chile. Su memoria y su obra perduran a través de la exposición de estos objetos en el Museo y en los rapanui que vinieron a estudiar al continente, convirtiéndose así en profesionales.

Biography

Fritz Felbermayer was born on February 2, 1907 in the town of Stein an der Donau, and his parents were Johann Felbermayer and Barbara Blecha. He studied Humanities in Vienna, where he was regarded as a good and diligent student. At that time, he also participated in the Vienna Boys' Choir. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts, he completed a PhD in Economic Science at the University of Vienna, where he also studied archaeology, a discipline that had interested him since childhood. Finally, he graduated with a degree in Agricultural Engineering from the Agricultural School of Mödling. In the Austrian capital, he also worked at the Museum of Popular Science.

Following his studies, his intellectual pursuits encouraged him to travel. He departed for the Malay Archipelago and Oceania, to the islands of Sumatra, Borneo, and Fiji. Finally, he settled in Chile, where he lived until his death. He worked at the Chilean Tobacco Company in Valparaíso for twenty-six years, having previously worked as an agronomist at a similar company in Vienna.

During his years in Chile, he wrote several articles, mainly on Rapanui archaeology and ethnography, many of which were published in Austria and Germany. He compiled the legends and traditions of the island and published these in a bilingual (Rapanui-German) edition. He also collaborated with the German journal *Orion*, and the journal *Biology* of the University of Tübingen,

and produced publications at the University of San Marcos in Lima, Peru, and at the University of Chile.

The strong attraction of Rapa Nui inspired him to learn the Rapanui language. He was a founding member and treasurer of the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua (Society of Friends of Easter Island). He showed special concern in promoting advanced works and welfare on the island in a permanent way, for the instruction of youth and for matters of housing and health, particularly among people from the leprosarium. Records show that he made five trips to Rapa Nui: one in 1946 and four in 1957.

In February 1969, the Chilean government awarded him the José Miguel Carrera Medal, which gave him automatic membership to the National Council of History for his extensive scientific and cultural work. In 1972, the Austrian government also honored him for similar reasons, giving him the Austrian Cross of Honor. He died on April 9, 1979, after a life fully oriented towards culture, and particularly to Rapa Nui (Gallaher 2011).

The Society

In 1947, the mayor of Valparaíso, Humberto Molina Luco, Federico (Fritz) Felbermayer, and others created the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua. As treasurer, Felbermayer managed to gather important donations of money, clothing, and building materials that were used in the construction of a leprosarium on



Figure 1. Building construction of the leprosarium (Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).



Figure 2. Nuns and male nurse in the leprosarium (Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).

Rapa Nui (Figures 1 & 2), which was completed in 1949 (Cristino 2011:47-48).

The Society was made aware of the problem of leprosy on Rapa Nui after an examination made by a doctor of the Chilean Navy. In the two trips that Humberto Molina Luco made in December 1946 and January 1949 (Molina 1950:12), the Society realized that the situation of leprosy on the island was very complicated, and the only possible solution was to gather money and hire a specialist in Hansen's disease (Hotus 2011:279-285).

In early 1950, the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua began sending annual consignments of food, clothing, and medications for the lepers (Figure 3). Meanwhile, for the first time, the islanders began to become acquainted with a significant number of Chileans from non-military and non-government social spheres, who later admitted them to the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua and, in some cases, acted as proxies, sponsoring islander children to study on the continent in their care (Cristino 2011:47-48).

In a boating accident in 1956, Professor Lorenzo Baeza Vega, the principal of the school of Hanga Roa, drowned, together with three Rapanui children. As a way to perpetuate the memory of her husband, Baeza's wife collaborated with the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua to lobby the Ministry of Education for the creation of ten scholarships for the best students of the Rapa Nui school, allowing them to travel to

...tesorero señor Federico Felbermayer, distinguido ingeniero agrónomo, doctor en ciencias económicas y arqueólogo titulado en Viena. Aprovecho esta ocasión para presentarle nuestros profundos agradecimientos por su labor tan abnegada y efectiva en obsequio de muchos compatriotas que habitan en nuestra lejana, soberana y misteriosa Isla de Pascua; esta labor filantrópica suya es más digna de aplauso, si se considera que el señor Felbermayer no es chileno.

Valparaíso, Mayo de 1950.

HUMBERTO MOLINA LUCO
Presidente de la Sociedad
"Amigos de la Isla de Pascua".

SI A UD. LE AGRADA LA OBRA PATRIOTICA QUE DESARROLLA ESTA SOCIEDAD, INGRESE A ELLA FIRMANDO LA CEDULA DE INCORPORACION DEL FRENTE

SOCIEDAD "AMIGOS DE LA ISLA DE PASCUA" N.º
Casilla
VALPARAISO

CEDULA DE INSCRIPCION

El que suscribe acepta la invitación del Directorio y se suscribe como miembro de la Sociedad "Amigos de la Isla de Pascua", estando de acuerdo con los Estatutos que la rigen.

Nombre y apellidos _____

Nacionalidad _____ Estado _____

Profesión _____

Domicilio _____

Cuota de incorporación _____

Cuota _____

Forma de pago _____

Donde _____

Firma _____

Presentado por _____

Aceptado en sesión del _____ de _____ de 195...

COMISION CALIFICADORA

Valparaíso, _____ de _____ de 195...

Figure 3. 1947-1950 Report of the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua.

continental Chile for further education from 1957 onwards. Some students came to study at the Normal School José Abelardo Núñez and were sponsored and supported by the Society (Cristino 2011:47-48).

La Compañía Explotadora de Isla de Pascua (CEDIP) took custody of a group of young Rapanui who had escaped from the island, hidden in the bilge of the Chilean Navy ship *Allipen*. The Society, who retroactively paid for the passages of the youths, took them from the area in which they were confined by the Navy guards, and placed them in the homes of different members of the Society – including Felbermayer – so they could be educated (Hotus 2011:279-285).

Another action taken by the Society, always with Felbermayer as the treasurer, was to encourage its members to improve the living conditions of the Rapanui, who in one way or another were dependent on CEDIP, the livestock company that had leased the island from the Chilean government for the purposes of running a sheep ranch. The pressure exerted by the Sociedad de Amigos de Isla de Pascua, along with reports from politicians and famous people of the time, eventually led the government to cancel the CEDIP contract (Pakarati 2011:299).

Felbermayer's Tangible Legacy

In August 2011, an unusual find was made in the collections of the Fonck Museum: an open reel tape that had belonged to Felbermayer and contained music from Rapa Nui. An application for funding was made, under the auspices of the Government of Chile's FONDART program, to preserve, research, and disseminate the contents of this tape. During the project implementation, the research team studied various items from Rapa Nui that Felbermayer had collected that had no associated documentation. Along with the tape, there were photographs of his trips to the island (Figures 4 & 5) and string figures, or *kai kai*, created with old ropes and attached to cards to retain their shape (Figure 6).

The project, called "Recovery and dissemination of Rapanui musical heritage, through the legacy of Fritz Felbermayer," ended in October 2012. The goals of this project were threefold: to scan the contents of the tape in order to preserve it for further use by other researchers, to gather as much information as possible related to the interpretation of the music and the context of the time, and lastly, to build an audiovisual support to display these elements in both the Fonck Museum and on the island itself (Figures 7 & 8).

The team that carried out the project consisted of five people, including an Australian expert in Rapanui music, Dan Bendrups. His subsequent report highlights the importance of the existence of this tape:



Figure 4. F. Felbermayer on his trip to Easter Island, 1946 (Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).



Figure 5. Ahu Oroï in 1946 (Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).

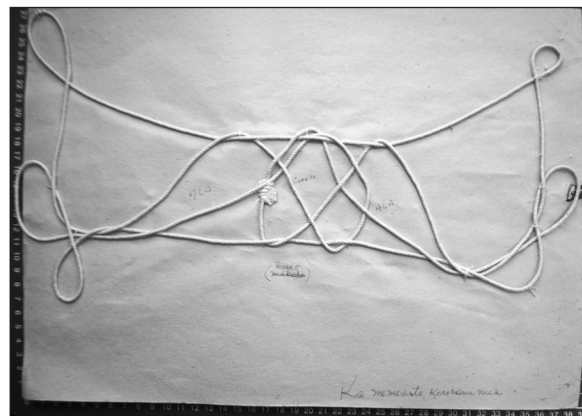


Figure 6. *Kai kai* (Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).

"...of the Felbermayer recording as important cultural heritage on two fronts. Firstly, for Chile, this find symbolized the inherent value of the museum as a heritage institution serving the public interest, which in turn validated the financial support that the project received from Chilean national arts



Figure 7 & 8. Audiovisual interactive module at the Fonck Museum that was created by the Felbermayer Project, 2012.

funding body FONDART. Secondly, for Rapanui itself, the tape represented the music of a long-gone era, and contained the voices of prominent and important cultural leaders whose influence lives on in the genealogical knowledge of their contemporary descendants. These elders lived at a time when material and technological possessions were extremely scarce on Rapanui, and their voices therefore have a kind of affirmational power because they provide audible representations of ancestors who are otherwise remembered in name only, substituting for written documents, photographs, and other types of memorabilia that would otherwise accompany similarly significant historical figures in continental Chile.” (Bendrup 2013:4).

He continues:

“However, a new set of observations arose as a result of the fieldwork process that was integral to this project, which consolidated our feelings about the tape’s heritage value. A significant aspect of the fieldwork involved meeting with older members of the community, including some who could remember the period of the songs in question, and their collective reactions to the music proved instructive.” (Bendrup 2013:9).

He ends with pointing out:

“Ultimately, the act of returning an item of cultural heritage to its community of origin is itself important as it symbolizes respect and valorizes culture. While symbolic, such processes may have ramifications for how people within society chose to valorize their heritage and traditions, and it is therefore not insignificant. This said, the experiences of the research team in returning this recording to the community, reflected in the examples of interactions above, reveal that the act of repatriation can also be a catalyst for action, renovation or change. In this case, such actions lay outside the theoretical scope of the project, but were a welcome coincidence. It is also significant that the reactions of the community to the recording were based on only the first hearing, captured during a two-week field trip. Further listenings may elicit other reactions, and further research would be required to capture these.” (Bendrup 2013:10).

As a result of the investigation, during the development of the various actions to be carried out on the island to achieve the above objectives, a connection between the pictures that were in the museum and other photographs was envisioned. These last pictures belonged to two German men who had also traveled to Rapa Nui with Felbermayer. This subsequently led to the development of other research on the journey in 1946 of these three Germans to Easter Island.



Figure 9. (above) *La Estrella* newspaper, 1980 (Historical Archive, Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).

The Felbermayer Collection

After the death of Fritz Felbermayer, his collection (formed with strict scientific basis over the years assisting the Rapanui community) was acquired by the Fonck Museum in Viña del Mar. On December 16, 1980, Mayor Edmundo Crespo opened the Felbermayer Collection on the second floor of the Palacio Carrasco, noting that it would enrich the Rapanui inventory of the Fonck Museum with 589 pieces, bringing it to approximately 1,400 pieces (Figure 9). That was quite an event, as it positioned the Fonck collection at the forefront of global Rapanui culture collections, with a large number of artifacts and objects (Gallaher 2004).

This collection represents Fritz Felbermayer's affection for Rapanui culture, with the centerpiece being a large textile, made from *mahute* (paper mulberry bark cloth), similar to those that exist in museum collections around the world (Figure 10). Originally this textile had drawings of birds applied with natural paints derived from particular soil and rock deposits on Rapa Nui, as seen in an historic photograph (Figure 11; Seelenfreund 2012: 95-123).



Figure 10. *Mahuete* layer from the Felbermayer Collection on exhibit in the Fonck Museum, 2014.



Figure 11. *Die Osterinsel*. Photograph of Magdalena Haoa Araki and Irene Hey Paoa by Hans Helfritz on his trip to Rapa Nui (Felbermayer Collection, Fonck Museum).

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